

Rob

Adams, J. G.

with

J. G. Adams's
Compliments

SIR WILLIAM ROBERTS.

OBITUARY.

Reprinted from the Montreal Medical Journal, August, 1899.



tra

SIR WILLIAM ROBERTS.

There are many physicians who have made for themselves a greater name and popular reputation than Sir William Roberts, but there have been few brighter spirits, few who by their life work have done so much to advance the credit of English medical research, very few in whom race, training and natural ability combined to produce so interesting and refreshing a personality.

For, in the first place, he was of Welsh Wales, and of the most intensely Welsh part of Wales, to wit, of Anglesea, where Cymric is still the universal medium of communication between all classes, so much so that the unfortunate "Sassenach," if he strays beyond Holyhead or Bangor, finds himself as much an Angle at sea as is the island itself. And throughout life Roberts bore himself as a Welshman of the best type. He was one of the small-built, black-haired Welshmen, alert and genial, with that accent and intonation of the English language that bewrayeth, and that simple humour which, as Shakespeare taught us by the mouth of Fluellen, is very far from denoting the simpleton. Not that Sir William would compel his antagonist to eat the leek: indeed, in this he departed from type. He was neither fiery nor litigious; on the contrary, was of so gentle a nature as to be peculiarly averse to picking a quarrel or hurting the feelings of any living man, present or absent. Yet, if one, listening to his ordinary social talk, were inclined to judge that talk childish in its playfulness, he would be brought up sharp against some shrewd sally or rejoinder, so full of knowledge and so rich in thought that of a sudden one's estimation of the man underwent an entire change.

training

His learning, further, was somewhat distinctive. The ordinary public school of his boyhood was strictly orthodox and under the sway of the Church of England. Thus, as the son of well-to-do Welsh, and therefore Calvinistic, parents, he was sent to Mill Hill in Hertfordshire, then recently established by the Congregationalists upon an undenominational basis, and thence, for his medical studies, he passed naturally to University College, which yet more fully represented the attempt to remove education from the domination of any one sect. The very liberalism which led to the foundation of these two institutions led, especially in the early years of their existence, to a renascent keenness in the spirit and methods of their teaching staffs, and of this young Roberts reaped the full benefit. It is not a little instructive to note how many of the leading English physicians and surgeons of the close of this century have been old University College men, pupils of Sharpey, Quain, Walshe, Jenner, and Erichsen.

That he was a brilliant student is shown by the fact that in his undergraduate career he obtained the highest honours in Chemistry and Physiology for the B.A. degree of the University of London, the medal and exhibition in Chemistry for the first M.B. examination, and later, the gold medals in Physiology, Comparative Anatomy, and Medicine, of that university. Gaining his M.B. degree in 1853, he studied for some months in France and Germany—a somewhat unusual course for an English physician of those days. As a sequel was his intimate and unusual acquaintance with continental medical literature.

This very course, excellent as it was and explaining as it does his later successes, told on him both favorably and unfavorably. Just as his training was distinctive, so his modes of work and thought throughout life remained independent. It may be that the provincial physician, like the colonial, labours under singular difficulties in making his work known and appreciated at headquarters and thence reflexly throughout the length and breadth of the empire, but something is due to Roberts' voluntary independence and isolation that his sound and valuable researches did not more rapidly become integral parts of current medical knowledge. During the greater part of his career, he cared little about making himself and his results known among his confreres at society meetings in London and elsewhere, or in the medical press. So, also, though for close on thirty years he was an active teacher, I do not think that the ordinary student appealed to him or gained the fullest benefit from his lectures and clinics, which, rather, were to be appreciated—and were appreciated—by the best men of each year. As a consultant, however, he had always that to say or to advise which was apt and valuable, and so expressed as to linger long in the memory.

In 1854, he was appointed house-surgeon to the Manchester Royal Infirmary, and so remarkable an impression did he immediately make, that the following year, when he was but twenty-five years old, he, a comparative stranger, was elected without opposition a full physician on the staff—a circumstance almost unique in the history of so large an English hospital. That same year he was appointed lecturer on anatomy and physiology in the School of Medicine, and from 1855 to 1889 he remained in intimate connection with these two institutions, becoming eventually senior physician to the one and professor of medicine in the other. Other appointments he did not seek; nor, indeed, did he actively seek private practice: it came to him. His first ten years in Manchester were spent very largely in the hospital wards and in his laboratory, but the results of his long period of strenuous study and research led to his being surely recognized in the middle of the "sixties" as the leading physician in the North of England, a position which he retained for twenty years or more, Clifford Allbutt, in Leeds,

being his only serious rival. But even when most fully engaged as a consultant, with much of his time spent in the train rushing here and there within a radius of one hundred miles of Manchester, his chiefest interest and his main source of relaxation lay in his laboratory.

In the middle of the century, laboratories of physiological and pathological chemistry were unknown in connection with British medical schools, and, the trend of Roberts' investigations being chemical, he was forced to establish his laboratory at his own house, nor when, later, the ample laboratory accommodation at the Owens College was at his disposal, would he take advantage of it. Thus his long series of studies upon the digestive ferments and artificial foods, upon uric acid and the urates, gravel and gout, were made in his own house during the course of a singularly active professional life; and, what is more, each laborious step in the preparation, weighing, and measuring of his material, was performed by himself, unaided by any assistant. "Far and few" are the men possessing the energy and tenacity to establish such a record. There is, it is true, a rising young New York physician, known to many in Montreal, who, upon the topmost storey of one of the Madison Avenue palaces, keeps and feeds and ultimately analyses a select herd of swine. Sir William Roberts' little den was of an earlier age and could not compare with the New York installation; if I mistake not the largest animals ever kept there were oysters.* That New York physician promises, by the present importance of his researches, to be a second Sir William Roberts, nay, it may be a greater than he, but, granting this case, it still remains wonderfully rare to find the busy and popular consultant making time to prosecute, single-handed, subtle researches in organic chemistry.

As for the published work of Sir William Roberts, a few words must here be said. That by which he made his mark was his well-known *Practical Treatise upon Urinary and Renal Diseases*, of which at least four editions have been published since 1865. This was, and, I think, remains, the most original and most thorough discussion of the subject in our language. To Roberts we owe the simple and curiously accurate yeast fermentation test for diabetic urine, as well as the basis of our knowledge of the action of solvents upon urinary calculi, together with observations upon the ultimate relationship of uric acid, the urates, and the quadriurates, or, more exactly, between the forms in which uric acid presents itself in the blood, the urine and the tissues,* observations as valuable as they are minute and painstaking, which are of elementary importance for the comprehension of both gravel and gout. This

* This, in the course of his studies upon foodstuffs, in which he proved that oysters—live oysters—are the most digestible of food in that, their liver or gastric ferments continuing active in the human stomach, they accommodately digest themselves. Thus, gastronomically speaking, it is a crime to cook the oyster.

† Croonian Lectures, 1892.

most valuable series of studies is little recognized by continental workers—a state of affairs for which, as already hinted, Roberts' isolation as a worker must, I think, be held in part responsible. To him also we owe the knowledge that the suppression of urine, as seen in calculous anuria, induces symptoms distinct from the uræmia of Bright's disease, knowledge based upon a series of observations and amply confirmed during the last few months only by the studies of Herter and Sydney Martin. As the leading authority upon renal disease he contributed important articles to the successive systems of Reynolds, Quain and Allbutt.

Row Bradford.

Next to the urinary system and the disturbances therewith connected, the digestive system claimed his attention. He was a pioneer in the study of the digestive ferments from the point of view of the physician and of the value of artificially digested foods; he called attention more especially to tryptic fermentation and the activity of the pancreatic secretion.* In 1891, he collected and placed in consecutive form his long series of papers dealing with *Digestion and Diet*.

Elected a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1877, in 1885 he (and his work) obtained the well-merited recognition of Knighthood, and in 1889, wishing to escape the burden of his large consulting practice, he settled in London that he might devote himself in a more leisurely and thorough manner to research. "Single-minded and free from all jealousies and small ambitions," his geniality and quaint humour soon made him a great addition to London medical society. Until they knew him, it was with bated breath that the staid metropolitan physicians saw him chaff the President of the Royal College of Physicians or other head of the profession, then, finding that no evil was meant and none ensued, they went on their way refreshed. One nearer to us in Montreal, himself also of the small-built, dark-haired, Celtic type, is surely now creating in London a similar impression and great popularity.

Thus busied with new interests in London, the continuance of old investigations in his laboratory, and the development (during his yearly holiday) of his country seat in Wales, Sir William Roberts' life during its last ten years would have been ideal had it not been saddened by the sudden death of an only son, then an undergraduate at Oxford, a blow from which he never wholly recovered. Very wisely, he accepted at this period a position as member of the Opium Commission, for in India he found that total change of scene and of surroundings that were then all important. In the autumn of 1898 symptoms of serious ill-health manifested themselves, and, progressing, led to his death on April 16th at the age of sixty-nine. He was buried at Llanymawddwy, Merionethshire.

J. G. Adami.

* Lumleian Lectures, 1880.

